

NEFIRS News

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written by Lori Loyd

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Reaping the Benefits of 5.0

We are into our fourth year of the new reporting system, NFIRS 5.0. Everyone reporting using this system is doing a great job. The redesign of the system has greatly improved the information that is being collected and, although it may not look like it at first, simplified collecting data on incidents.

The required fields on the paper modules are marked with stars (in most cases) and then arrows and fine print may direct the user on to additional fields that need to be completed based on a code that was entered. The software marks required fields in yellow or blue and turn red if they aren't completed or the information entered is incorrect.

Just completing the required information will meet reporting requirements, but if you want to reap the full benefits of NFIRS 5.0 we strongly recommend that departments fill in as much of the information that is possible. This not only provides the users of the data with a clearer picture of the incident but also helps you in remembering exactly what happened at an incident if asked by an insurance company or court of law. Valuable information that may aid fire prevention and education efforts may also be gained that would otherwise have been overlooked.

Not many fields are required on the modules that USFA consider optional (although Nebraska is requesting they be completed) - EMS, Haz Mat, and Arson, but the potential to collect much more information on the incident is there for the taking.

There are many benefits that can be gained from the NFIRS reporting system if you take advantage of it's full potential. Completing the reports provides departments with much of the

data that is needed to request grant money or to support budget proposals and equipment requests to governing boards.

You may think of it as a nuisance (or worse) to have to fill the reports out but the benefits you can reap from them are tremendous if you really want to put the data to your use.

Estimated Dollar Loss/Pre-Incident Value

In previous newsletters I asked that "Total" not be entered in the Estimated Dollar Loss field and that you make your best estimate of the damage caused by the fire rather than leave the field blank or write in "Total" or "Unknown". Most of you are doing a good job on this but there are still a few who seem to be reluctant to enter an estimate. Departments are not held responsible for this estimate.

The loss of this information impacts statistics. We are already at a disadvantage since half the departments in the state do not report the fires in their jurisdiction as mandated by law. When those reporting don't make an effort to enter their best estimate of the dollar loss, or the actual dollar loss if known, the problem is only compounded. I know there will be fires with zero dollar loss but this is usually the exception not the norm.

Estimated dollar loss is the rough estimation of the total loss to the property and any contents in terms of the cost of replacement in like kind and quantity. The Pre-Incident Value is the estimation of the replacement cost of the property and contents.

Since I can't explain the importance any

better than the NFIRS 5.0 Handbook here is the rationale for this field:

"Estimated dollar loss helps illustrate the magnitude of the fire problem, provides an additional indicator of the incident severity, and can be used to evaluate progress in fire protection. This information helps local communities, states, and the country determine the amount of money that should be spent on fire protection.

"Estimated dollar loss is also crucial for identifying types of situations where high monetary losses are common. This information helps target fire prevention programs. Dollar loss estimates also can be used to evaluate the cost-effectiveness of various equipment and fire protection practices.

"Pre-incident value helps indicate the magnitude of the potential fire problem by providing a basis for comparison."

The Handbook goes on to ask that you "Enter the best estimates of dollar loss and pre-incident value (local option) that are practical to make or obtain. Monetary losses should be estimated as accurately as possible, though it is understood that the estimates may be rough approximations."

Collection of this information shows the benefits of the fire service and the work firefighters perform. Through the use of NFIRS departments have the evidence to show that even though there were 50 fires that caused \$150,000 damage to property with a value of \$650,000, because of training and having reliable apparatus and the necessary tools available the department saved the community \$500,000 in potential property losses.

One word of caution though. Don't enter the same amount in the Pre-Incident Value fields as was entered in the Estimated Dollar Loss fields unless it was actually a total loss. If you enter the same amounts to clear an error or warning, you will actually be skewing the information and it would be better to leave the Pre-Incident Value fields blank. If you are using software you should not be forced to make an entry in the Pre-Incident Value fields and should only receive a warning if it is left blank.

This type of information will help in obtaining future funding for equipment and apparatus the department needs. However, if it is not collected then there is nothing to support the request. It may also have an undesirable impact on your ISO or insurance rating if dollar loss is not collected.

NFIRS 5.0 Software

The Fire Marshal's Office does not endorse one vendor's software over another. It is each department's choice as to what software, if any, you purchase although it must be compatible with the federal reporting system. WE ARE STILL ACCEPTING PAPER IN 5.0, however, departments may find using software easier.

If you are interested in software, the approved vendor list can be found at www.nfirs.fema.gov/activevendors.htm or contact me and I will send you a list. Don't forget to ask about the hardware requirements (what kind of computer you need) when you are talking with a vendor about their software. Some departments have purchased software that is not compatible with their computer. If you purchase a new computer with Windows XP Home version, some vendor software will not work. It will work with the Windows XP Professional version.

Departments should also purchase tech support or a maintenance contract with your software. This will ensure that you receive software upgrades and are able to contact the vendor with any problems with the software. Upgrades to the software are important so you stay current with reporting requirements and receive any fixes to "bugs" in the software.

If you need help installing the software or if you are having problems with the software (exporting data, etc), you need to contact the vendor for assistance. The State Fire Marshal's Office is not responsible for vendor software support. However, if you have questions on completing a report, e.g., what code or module to use or how to send your data feel free to contact Cathy or me.

Federal Data Entry Tool

We have started letting a few departments use the software developed by the USFA, the Federal Data Entry Tool (DET). So far things have gone well and I haven't encountered a lot of problems. There is no cost for using this software other than internet connection costs and Cathy's and my time providing support (USFA will not support fire departments using this software).

To use this software you MUST have internet access from the computer you have the software installed on. You will be entering your reports directly to the federal server and will not have to export any data to me. Each time a user logs onto the National database, a check is made to ensure the user has the latest software version which includes bug fixes and enhancements. Email notices are also sent to the users letting them know of any scheduled downtimes (times when the system will not be available) or other problems and of any upgrades that need to be downloaded and installed.

Since Cathy and I do not have the time to teach people how to use a computer, we are asking that anyone wanting to use the software be comfortable using a computer and understand how to download and install software or have someone available to them who can assist them when necessary. At no time should the software program be altered other than by installing USFA upgrades.

A tutorial is available at www.nfirs.fema.gov that explains how to download and use the software. If you understand the tutorial then you shouldn't have any trouble using the software. Once you register I will have to activate you before you can download the software and start using it. When registering please use the department FDI D number or name as the Username. This helps me identify who is wanting the software when I go to activate users. Passwords must be at least eight characters long and contain at least one number. They expire every 90 days, however, if there has not been any activity on your account for 60 days it will be deactivated. If this happens or you forget your password you will need to contact me to reset your account.

If you use the DET and fail to correct errors, keep the software current, make unauthorized modifications to the software, access other department's data and alter it or other improper use of the software/access, your access to the server will be revoked and you will need to purchase another vendor's software or complete the paper modules to comply with reporting requirements.

DET users should also periodically check the News section of the USFA/NFIRS website <http://www.nfirs.fema.gov/news.htm> . Any information or changes to the software or using the software will be posted here.

Aether/FireRMS Software Users

I have discovered that the data received from several Aether/FireRMS software users has different FDI D numbers where that department's FDI D number should appear. This seems to only occur on incidents where the department gave mutual aid to another department.

I've done a little playing around with their software and talked with a couple of departments to see how they are entering information and think I have figured out the problem.

When you first set up your software initially you need to go to Tools-Customize-Codes-Other Agencies and enter the departments and their FDI D numbers that you normally give mutual aid to (you can add others later if you need to but you will need to do so before starting to enter the incident).

Then when you are entering the incident all you need to do is click the Add button in the Mutual Aid Resources field and select the department you gave aid to.

On the location tab there is a field for FDI D number and I believe this is where the problem is occurring. If you enter the FDI D number for the other fire department in this field when the data is exported the incident will appear as being from that fire department and will go into their "folder" on the server instead of yours and you will not receive credit for the

report. If you are entering an FDID number in this field, please leave it blank or enter your own FDID number. I will continue to monitor the data and see if this solves the problem.

I have gone back through last year's data files received from FireRMS users and have hopefully found all the incidents that had the wrong FDID number and corrected them.

You can look at your data after you do the export and before sending it to me if you want. All you need to do is open the file in WordPad or Word. It may look like garbage to you since it will be rows of numbers and text separated by special characters such as ^ or | but it isn't. Each row should begin with your FDID number.

If you see a different FDID number there you can correct it to yours by deleting the number (be careful not to delete the character following the number) and typing in the correct number (be careful not to type over data - have Insert on before you start typing). Also some of the lines may wrap around to the next line because they are too long for the margin settings. So be careful here and don't think your FDID number is missing because of my earlier statement that said every row will start with your FDID number.

You could also do a Find and Replace to correct the FDID number but if you do, don't use Replace All. This could replace any valid data where the numbers happen to match the FDID number.

If you look at your data and don't feel comfortable correcting the FDID number if you find it is wrong, let me know when you send the data and then I will be sure to correct it before I import the data.

We have also recently learned that some departments may have received a corrupted cd-rom when Aether sent out version 3.28 this winter. If you are having trouble installing your software or you notice when you go to export your data that Export is greyed out, contact Aether and request a new cd be sent out. If you have problems getting a hold of Aether, let us know.

Minimum Computer Requirements

If purchasing a computer or having one donated to

you, the following information should help you in obtaining a computer that will handle NEFIRS reporting.

Federal Data Entry Tool:

- ▶ 200 MHz Pentium processor or better
- ▶ 64 MB RAM (memory)
- ▶ Windows 95-B or 98 (NOTE: Windows ME is not supported)
- ▶ 30 MB available hard disk space
- ▶ 28.8 Kbps modem (56K (V.90 bps) would be better)
- ▶ Monitor with 800 x 600 resolution
- ▶ Mouse
- ▶ Internet connection

Vendor Software:

- ▶ 500 MHz Pentium III processor or better
- ▶ 128 MB RAM (256 MB or more is recommended)
- ▶ Windows 98 SE although Windows 2000 SP3 or Windows XP Professional would be better as future upgrades to the vendor's software will probably not work in Windows 98
- ▶ 50 MB available hard disk space (more would be better as this is what is required just to install one vendor's software and doesn't include necessary space to store the data)
- ▶ 28.8 Kbps modem (56K (V.90 bps) would be better)
- ▶ CD-ROM drive (or DVD or CD-RW drive)
- ▶ Monitor with 800 x 600 resolution
- ▶ Mouse
- ▶ Internet connection recommended

Email Addresses

If you have an email address and have not let us know, please email it to lloyd@sfm.state.ne.us. We are looking at emailing press releases, newsletters and other pertinent information to fire departments to save on printing costs. The Lieutenant Governor has also asked us for this information so he can keep fire chiefs informed about homeland security activities.

New Website

By the time you receive this newsletter, our website should have been moved to a new address: www.sfm.state.ne.us. I am also in the process of redoing the site so keep checking to see what's new.

NFIRS 5.0 Reminders

NOTE: References to fields and sections are by the names the USFA gave the objects. Some software vendors changed the names and/or locations. Hopefully you will still understand what I am referring to. If not, let me know.

◆ This is the last year to report using NFIRS 4.1. Effective January 1, 2004 ONLY NFIRS 5.0 reports will be accepted. I still have a very small supply of the NFIRS 4.1 incident report but plenty of the civilian and firefighter casualty forms if you need them. Pre-addressed envelopes are also available to mail in either 4.1 or 5.0 paper reports.

◆ Questions regarding NFIRS should be directed to Cathy or myself. Do not contact USFA with coding or software questions.

◆ The incident number is a numeric field. Do NOT enter an alpha or special character (-, /). If you use software it will probably allow you to do this, but your report will not be easily retrieved if it even can be retrieved. If you are adding letters to your incident number in order to keep them separate, e.g., fires from rescue calls, you could do this by starting fire calls with 1 or 03 (last two digits of the year) and rescue calls with 2 or 2003 or some other numbering scheme. You may also be able to accomplish what you are trying to do by using text in the incident number by utilizing the Station field and/or the District field.

◆ Do not use fields for other purposes than what they are intended for. This will result in garbage data. Use the Comments field or Special Studies field to capture other information.

◆ A Civilian Fire Casualty module, not an EMS module, should be completed for civilians injured (any injury - not just burns and smoke inhalation) at a fire scene or who die in the fire, even if treated and/or transported by EMS. The EMS module should be used for non-fire incidents only.

◆ A Fire Service Casualty module should be completed for any injury or fatality to a fire-fighter regardless of the incident type (fire or non-fire).

◆ To save everyone's time, don't complete the EMS Module if you did not treat someone (on stand by, false alarm, canceled enroute, etc). When you do complete an EMS module it is strongly recommended you take full advantage of the report and complete more than just the two required fields (Provider Impression and Initial Level of Provider). Otherwise, especially if you are sending in paper, you are wasting your time and paper as this information can be captured in the Comment section of the Basic Module.

◆ When entering the location information for an incident on the Basic Module, please utilize all the fields available and use them as intended. The information is broken down the way it is in order to utilize GIS (mapping) software.

Street address: The number should be entered in the Number/Mile field, the prefix (East, North, South, West, Southwest, etc) should be entered in the Street Prefix field, the street name in the Street or Highway field, the street type (street, road, lane, circle, highway, etc) in the Street Type field and if any suffix (East, South, North, West, Southwest, etc) in the Suffix field. Please do not put the entire address in the Street or Highway field except for Rural Routes as noted below.

For an address like 246 Highway 2, enter the 246 in the Number/Mile field, the 2 in the Street or Highway field and Highway in the Street Type field.

Apartment, suite or lot numbers should be entered in the Apartment/Suite/Room field. Please do not enter a pound sign (#) before the number or Apt 5, Suite 21, etc. Just enter the number 5 or 21 or 5A.

Intersection: Enter one street or highway in the Street or Highway field and the other in the Cross Street or Directions field.

Rural Routes: Some departments enter rural route address (RR 1, Box 20 or HC1, Box 5). If used these should be entered entirely in the

Street or Highway field. We would prefer though that instead of using this type of address that you enter the information as directions. Reports will not be returned if RR or HC are used.

Highway/Mile Marker: If the incident occurred on a highway or the interstate at a certain mile marker, enter the mile marker number in the Number/Mile field the highway number in the Street or Highway field and Highway in the Street Type field. If the incident occurred on the interstate enter I 80 or I-80 in the Street or Highway field and leave Street Type blank.

◆ Please do not abbreviate city names or develop your own codes when completing location information (exceptions: St for Saint and Ft for Fort are acceptable), especially if you are using software. Also don't use housing addition/subdivision names in place of the city or add rural to the city name. I have spent many hours correcting this and the location information in the database so things will be correct in the state and federal database.

Keep in mind when completing incident reports that members of your department are not the only ones seeing the data. If other users are not familiar with the state they aren't going to know what is entered is an abbreviation or code instead of a real city name.

It also complicates searches for information if the full name isn't there. If I need to find fires in Bellevue and the city is entered as BEL, I would have to broaden the search and then sort through the results which would include Bellevue, Belgrade, Belden, Bellwood, and Belvidere when all I wanted was fires that occurred in Bellevue.

◆ Software users: Please include your FDID number and timeframe in the filename (example: 99001June02.txt). Having this information in the filename helps to locate the right file if needed.

◆ When completing a report for a confined fire within a structure (Incident Types 113-118) don't forget to complete Section H2 Detector. An error occurs if this information is missing.

◆ Please don't take the easy way out and use Incident Type 100 Fires, Other when there is a more descriptive code available. The use of this code means you are unable to classify a fire as a structure, vehicle, grass, trash, outside fire, or

crop fire. With few exceptions, it should be possible to find a more definitive code to use. If you are not sure what the appropriate code is, please contact Cathy or myself for assistance in coding the report.

◆ If the Incident Type on the Basic Module is coded 130-139 then the mobile property information must be completed on the Fire Module.

◆ When completing the mobile property information please note that for Section H2 on the Fire Module there is a separate code for automobile/passenger car and pickup. A passenger vehicle is code 11 and a pickup truck is code 22.

◆ Don't forget to enter at least the FDID number of the department you gave mutual aid to. This is the five digit number assigned by this office to each department and not a code your department devises. The federal computer system tries to match up reports from the department receiving mutual aid with any reports from departments giving mutual aid at an incident. This can't be done unless there is a common denominator - the FDID number.

Also, the incident number that should be entered in Field D Aid Given or Received on the Basic Module is the incident number the department you gave aid to assigns to their incident and not your incident number. If you do not know the other department's incident number leave the field blank.

◆ The intention of the Exposure Number field on the Basic Module is not to enter the number of exposures that may have occurred. If there are exposure fires, a separate report needs to be completed for each exposure. The incident number would be the same on all reports but the exposure number would change - 000 for the original, 001 for the first exposure, 002 for the second, etc.

◆ When entering the number of personnel in Block G1 on the Basic Module, count the Chief as Other if they were present as incident commander only. If they assisted with EMS or suppression then count them in that field.

◆ WE WILL ACCEPT PAPER REPORTS IN NFIRS 5.0!! We know it is not feasible for everyone to buy a computer and software.